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REVIEWS

GRAMMAR AND THINKING¹

The little girl who was obliged by her mother to correct her enthusiastic "I just love cake. It is awfully nice!" to the conventional "I like cake. It is very good," protested with an air of disgust that "it sounds as if I was talking about *bread*." With this little girl, I suspect, Mr. Sheffield would feel much sympathy. In a thoroughgoing and convincing manner, his recent book, *Grammar and Thinking*, traces the relation between the form of expression and the thought. The correct use of any word or form may be determined only by a knowledge of its context. No rule of syntax is the arbiter but rather the power of any given expression to carry the precise meaning which the writer or speaker means to convey. On occasion, dialect or even slang may best meet our "expressive purpose," and Henley's "Them that wasn't bald was beardless" is quoted to show how an effect would be spoiled by a change to "Those that were not," etc. Notwithstanding this need for freedom, Mr. Sheffield protests against a slipshod use of the language and deplores the modern attitude into which even the school man occasionally lapses, which holds that no grammatical rule may be safely laid down as true for even twenty years hence. As an offset to this loose manner of thinking, Mr. Sheffield presents a minute analysis of the fundamental conceptions of grammar. He traces the growth of language forms from the time when thought, itself not well analyzed, was expressed by an "agglutinative" stage of language. As men more clearly felt different aspects of their thought, this agglutinative speech broke up into inflected forms to express more closely the varying ideas. The theory that inflected languages have grown up out of simpler, "isolating" languages, Mr. Sheffield convincingly combats, as he also does the corollary that our own language has lost its inflections by decay. Our disuse of flectional forms and our use of particles and varying word order are an outgrowth of our greater complexity of thinking and are the response of the language in its effort to fit the thought.

Professor George Lyman Kittredge, in a monograph entitled, *Some Landmarks in the History of English Grammars*, speaks with respect of a

¹*Grammar and Thinking. A Study of the Working Conceptions in Syntax.* By Alfred Dwight Sheffield. New York: Putnam, 1912.

famous treatise, issued in 1751 by James Harris—*Hermes; or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar*. This book developed the system of grammar inherent in all languages by reference to their relation to orderly thought. Harris, as Professor Kittredge points out, “naturally enough, had no idea of the historical method, no conception of the life and growth of the language, no genuinely comparative point of view.” Nevertheless, this little book had “no little influence in emancipating English grammar from a slavish adherence to Latin.” In marked contrast to this early attempt, Mr. Sheffield’s book is very evidently written by one who has a thorough linguistic knowledge both of the historical growth of our own language and also of the usage of widely diversified tongues. The book is rich in illustrations from Greek and Latin, French, German and Italian, Chinese and Lithuanian—a diversity of language material which allows this author to mark clearly the distinctions which he wishes his readers to recognize in the various syntax conceptions.

The greater part of the book is devoted, as the subtitle would indicate, to a study of the working conceptions in syntax. The value of each of our grammatical classifications and the reaction between the forms recognized by grammar and the varied thought-conceptions are presented in a novel and ingenious manner. The “dry bones” of grammar are so dressed that even the casual reader feels that the field has been illuminated.

While this book will be inspiring to the teacher of English, it can work no radical change in our classroom practice unless Mr. Sheffield or some competent person under his direction gives a fuller, more detailed guide. Mr. Sheffield urges that we so teach grammar as to impart “insight into the nature of the language medium.” For the elementary school he says the study “may well come early, for the child is already using speech, and can easily be interested in its forms. He has first to discern the judgment-form that gives unity to the sentence, taking its subject and predicate as wholes; to learn the meaning of its relating elements; and to get a practical notion of mood, tense, and the distinctions of direct and reported speech. Even at this stage he should understand the sentence as an organic thought-whole that divides its expression between notional and formative word-rudiments, and not as a mechanical sum of words.”

The present writer doubts whether our pupils in the elementary schools reach a sufficient maturity to grasp this conception. For the secondary-school period, such a study of grammar is recommended as

shall recognize the thought-concept as a whole and shall then proceed to analyze the whole into its organic paragraphs, sentences, and words. Such sentence study would serve as "high-school philosophy." By comparison of grammatical forms in foreign languages with those of the mother-tongue, the pupil would get an understanding of the "grammatical conditions to which thought is variously subject" and thus free "his thought from the letter of the medium." Such a study must be late in the course, that a proper background of foreign language may give it significance. Such a course, properly planned, by its novel content and rigorous method, would probably appeal to the earnest pupils more strongly than any course we can now devise in rhetoric. It seems probable that greater power of expression and a sounder thought-conception would result. If some practical course can be worked out to this end, Mr. Sheffield may have hastened the fulfilment of the prophecy with which he closes his book: "When grammar can rest its case in imparting real insight into the rich and subtle medium that it works with, it may regain something of its prestige in the middle age, when it headed the roll of the seven liberal arts."

D. H. FLETCHER

A BOOK WHICH IS NO BOOK¹

The Writer's Desk Book bears an attractive title which is likely to commend the work "sight unseen" to those who feel the need of, or who may have been seeking for, an authority or a reference book on the subject of "style." There are, pre-eminently, two classes of persons to whom "style" should be, but too often is not, of paramount importance—authors, editors, *et id genus omne*, and printers. Webster defines the word in its relation to typography as "the manner or plan followed in any particular office or case in dealing with certain details of typography . . . preparation of copy, display, and the like, which can be regulated by rule, and in regard to which customs may differ, as spelling, capitalization, and division, punctuation, abbreviations, etc." It has, of course, to be admitted that in such particulars as capitalization, abbreviations, the use of italics, etc., typographical "style" is a flexible practice, depending a good deal upon varying views of good taste. Thus Webster in his definition very properly makes use of the words, "the . . . plan followed in any particular office or case . . . in regard to which customs may differ."

¹ *The Writer's Desk Book*. By William Dana Orcutt. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1912. Pp. vi+184. 60 cents net.